

Baling is the business for fall at Oakdale Gin

By Lee Harris Potter

Although a modern cotton gin is faster and more efficient than Eli Whitney's original machine, its function and processes have remained basically the same.

Most of the changes in the cotton business have occurred in the growing and harvesting processes and in the textile economy.

Julian Johnson said he has seen enormous changes in the cotton industry just in his 12 years as business manager of the Oakdale Gin near Raeford.

The small cotton growers have gone out of business partly because of the invention of expensive mechanical cotton pickers in the late 50's.

A regular spindle cotton harvester now costs almost \$75,000 and according to Johnson, the costs of pesticides, herbicides, and labor can add up to around \$400 per acre.

In addition, homegrown cotton can barely compete with cotton imported from China, Brazil and India with their low labor costs.

The Oakdale Gin now serves only five major customers, Jimmy McGougan, John Balfour, Earl Hendrix, David Dalton and Buddy Newton.

The gin was constructed in the 1960's and is the fifth to be built on the site a mile out of Raeford on Highway 20.

It is owned by two sisters, Mrs. June S. Johnson and Mrs. Agnes May Campbell, and managed by Mrs. Johnson's son, Julian Johnson, and her son-in-law, Eddie Baker.

The Johnson Company also includes a wholesale fertilizer business, a garden supply and hardware store, and an insurance agency.

The cotton gin only operates during the harvest season, usually from mid-September to Thanksgiving.

The gin employs 10 men per shift, operating two shifts during half of the season, Johnson said.

Most of the workers collect unemployment during the rest of the year, he said. Unless they find some work with the tobacco crop.

The Oakdale Gin must process 2,200 to 2,300 bales of cotton to break even financially. One year they may gin as few as 1,200 bales and another year as many as 4,200 bales. This year Johnson expects to process almost 3,800 bales.

But the current market price of cotton is only 60 cents a pound, and many farmers are storing the baled cotton in the Hoke Cotton Warehouse in hopes that the cotton will rise to 75 or 80 cents a pound.

The 1985 cotton crop has been good, yielding 900 pounds, or almost two 500-pound bales, per acre.

The raw cotton is brought to the gin in wagons and sucked up by a giant vacuum cleaner into the building where it is blown through pipes to the various machines by a fan system.

The soft white lint is separated from the cotton seeds and from the hulls, twigs and other trash by machines with spikes or circular sawblades attached to drums rotating at high speeds while the cotton passes by.

The cottonseed drops to the bottom of the machines and is blown through pipes to a holding tank which dumps every accumulated 20 pounds into an outside storage bin.

Cottonseed is sold as an ingredient of cattle fodder because of its high protein content. The seeds are also pressed into oil or ground into meal.

When cottonseed prices are good, the farmer trades the cottonseed for the ginning fees. This year, however, cottonseed prices are low -- \$55 per ton compared to last year's \$170 per ton, and Johnson said they will have to charge \$40 a bale for ginning the cotton.

Another by-product of the ginning process is mote cotton. Although it is of poor quality and full of twigs and trash, it can be sold to a company in Charlotte which cleans and reprocesses it for the usable lint.

Mote cotton was used in the old days to stuff mattresses and horse collars.

A sample of each cotton bale must be sent for inspection and grading to the United States Department of Agriculture office in Florence, S.C.

By the end of the process, the cotton lint has been neatly tamped into square bales which are secured with metal bands.

The cotton fiber is probably of no better quality than the cotton produced by hand-ginning, said Julian Johnson, but the demands on human labor are considerably reduced.

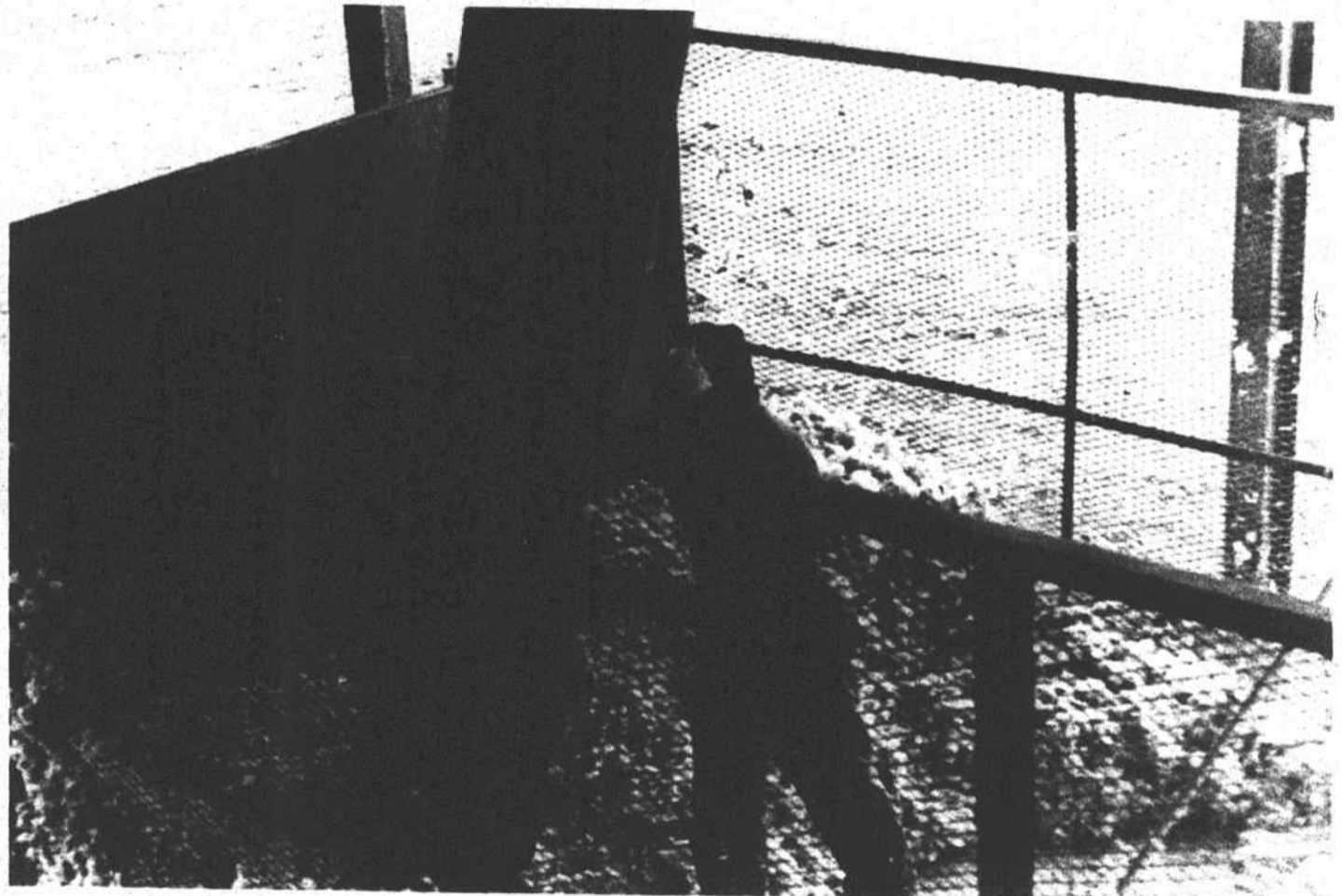


Inspecting machine
Julian Johnson, business manager of the Oakdale Gin, inspects a machine whose rotating cylinder of circular saw blades tears the cotton, separating lint from seed and trash.



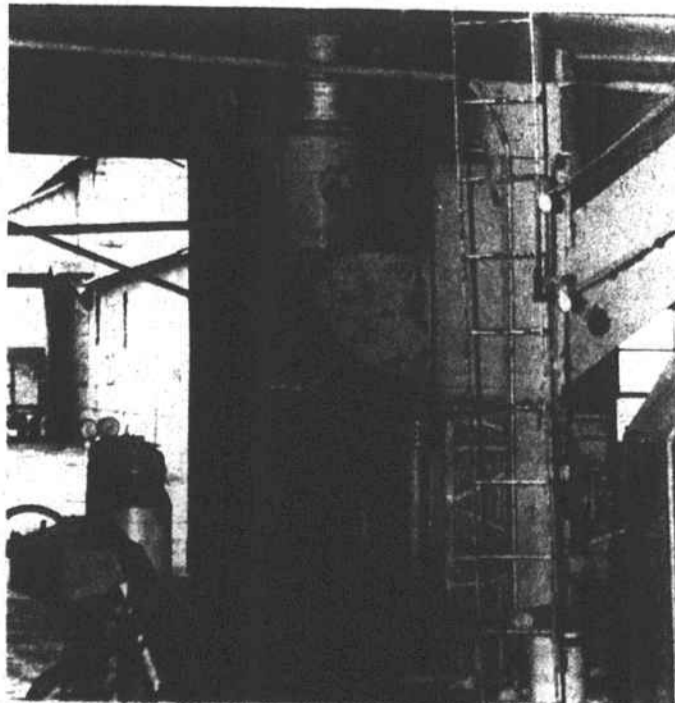
Demonstrates baler

Eddie Baker, operator of the Oakdale Gin, demonstrates the baling machine operation. The gin must process 2,200 to 2,300 bales of cotton during its two months of operation for the business to break even financially. In a good year, they may make as many as 4,200 bales, but some years they have baled as few as 1,200. Johnson said they expect to gin 3,800 bales of cotton this year. Eddie Baker said there are sometimes low temperature fires burning in the cotton lint as it is being dried by the hot air in the fan pipes. These are easily extinguished, but there have been major fires at the gin.



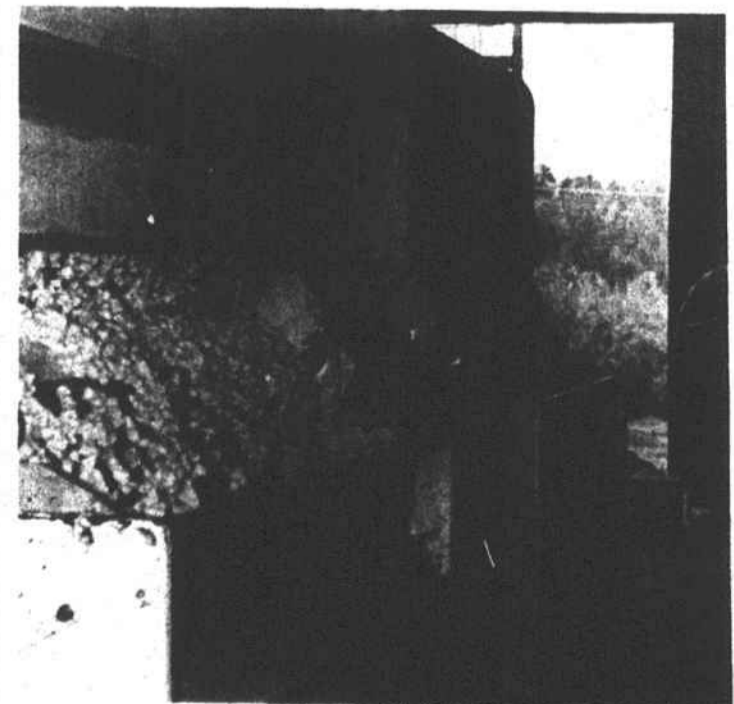
Sucking up cotton

James Campbell stands in the cotton wagon to push a giant vacuum hose which sucks the raw cotton into the gin building.



Down the shoot

Finally the cotton is blown down the shoot (right) into a baler machine. A tamper presses the cotton into one of the two rectangular chambers, and then the platform swivels so that one baler chamber can be opened and metal bands secured around the bale of cotton while the other chamber is being filled.



Removing seeds

A fan system blows the cotton to the various machines through pipes a foot in diameter, and it eventually reaches the two gins whose tiny saw blades tear out remaining seeds and trash.